

A New Wave of Atrocity Accountability: The Age of Aggression

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INTRODUCTION

Across the past eight decades, the international community has experienced successive “waves” of atrocity accountability—periods in which global norms either strengthened or eroded in the face of mass violence, authoritarian resurgence, and geopolitical disruption. These waves, first articulated by David Crane, trace the arc of humanity’s struggle to restrain the worst impulses of power. Today, the world stands at the threshold of a fourth wave: the Age of Aggression, a moment defined by the collapse of long-standing restraints, the rise of strongman politics, and the open defiance of the United Nations Charter by powerful states—including the United States itself. Its actions against Venezuela threaten other UN member states in the Western Hemisphere—Colombia, Cuba, and Greenland (Denmark).

This contribution outlines the four waves of accountability, analyzes their significance, and assesses the grave implications of a world in which aggression is once again normalized as a tool of statecraft.

I. THE FIRST WAVE: NUREMBERG AND THE BIRTH OF MODERN ACCOUNTABILITY

The first wave began in 1945 with the International Military Tribunal at Nuremberg. For the first time in history, leaders were held criminally responsible for waging aggressive war and orchestrating atrocities. Nuremberg established three foundational principles:

- Individual criminal responsibility for international crimes, including crimes against humanity and the crime of aggression.
- The rejection of impunity for heads of state, a revolutionary concept at the time.
- The articulation of a rules-based international order, grounded in the UN Charter and the promise of “never again.”

Nuremberg created the legal and moral architecture for modern international criminal law. It was the first great wave of accountability—a moment when the world believed law could restrain power.

II. THE SECOND WAVE: THE AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY (1990s–2010s)

The post-Cold War era ushered in a renewed commitment to justice. The atrocities in the Balkans and Rwanda shocked the conscience of the world and led to the creation of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR). This period also saw:

- The establishment of hybrid tribunals, including the Special Court for Sierra Leone, which indicted a sitting head of state for the first time since Nuremberg.
- The creation of the International Criminal Court, a permanent institution intended to deter future atrocities.
- A global movement toward universal jurisdiction, truth commissions, and domestic accountability mechanisms.

This second wave was marked by optimism—a belief that law could be institutionalized, that accountability could be normalized, and that the international community could respond collectively to mass atrocity.

III. THE THIRD WAVE: THE AGE OF THE STRONGMAN

Beginning in the 2010s, the world entered a darker period. Authoritarian leaders consolidated power, democratic norms eroded, and the international system fractured. This third wave is defined by:

- The resurgence of strongman rule, from Russia to China to Turkey to the Philippines.
- The deliberate weakening of multilateral institutions, including the UN Security Council.
- The normalization of disinformation, repression, and political violence as tools of governance.
- The paralysis of the international justice system, unable to act against powerful states.

This wave represents a direct challenge to the gains of the previous decades. Strongmen reject accountability as a threat to their survival. They view international law not as a constraint but as an obstacle to be dismantled.

IV. THE FOURTH WAVE: THE AGE OF AGGRESSION

The fourth wave is not separate from the third—it is its logical extension. It is the moment when strongman politics metastasizes into open aggression, when the restraints of the UN Charter are cast aside, and when powerful states embrace force as a primary instrument of foreign policy.

1. The Collapse of the UN Paradigm

For eighty years, the UN Charter's prohibition on the use of force has been the cornerstone of global stability. That paradigm is now under direct assault. Under the current U.S. administration, the United States has:

- Abandoned multilateralism in favor of national-centric foreign policy
- Asserted dominance in the Western Hemisphere through coercive military posturing, including toward Venezuela, Cuba, and even Greenland
- Signaled to the world that great powers may act unilaterally, without legal justification or international support

When one of the world's most powerful member states disregards the Charter, it sends a message: the rules no longer apply. We no longer settle our dispute peaceably.

2. *The Global Ripple Effect*

Strongmen elsewhere are watching—and learning. If the United States uses force to impose its will, why should others refrain?

- Russia's aggression against Ukraine becomes easier to justify when the U.S. itself disregards the prohibition on force.
- Regional powers may feel emboldened to settle disputes militarily, claiming precedent.
- The Security Council becomes irrelevant, unable to restrain its own permanent members.

The Age of Aggression is not merely a geopolitical shift—it is a normative collapse.

3. *The Return of 19th-Century Power Politics*

The fourth wave signals a reversion to a world where:

- Might makes right
- Borders are redrawn by force
- International law is optional
- Atrocity becomes a tool of statecraft

This is the antithesis of the post-1945 order. It augurs a dark 21st century in which the protections built over decades are dismantled in a matter of years.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The Age of Aggression threatens to unleash a cascade of consequences:

- Increased frequency of interstate conflict, as norms erode and deterrence collapses

- Greater risk of mass atrocities, as strongmen use violence to consolidate power
- Weakening of global governance, leaving crises unmanaged and populations unprotected
- A legitimacy crisis for international criminal law, which cannot function without state cooperation

If this wave continues unchecked, the world may face a century defined not by accountability but by impunity.

VI. CONCLUSION: THE NEED FOR A FIFTH WAVE

The first four waves show a clear trajectory: from hope to erosion to collapse. The challenge now is to imagine—and build—a fifth wave:

- A renewed commitment to the UN Charter
- A strengthened system for prosecuting aggression
- A global coalition willing to confront strongmen
- A revitalized belief that law can restrain power

The Age of Aggression is not inevitable nor final. But reversing it will require courage, leadership, and a recommitment to the principles first articulated at Nuremberg. The stakes could not be higher. The 21st century will be shaped by whether the world chooses accountability—or accepts atrocity as the new normal.